

Generation Greta older and angrier; Young activists demand immediate action on emissions, transition to green economy

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Body

It's hard to believe it was only four years ago when a Swedish teenager skipped school for the environment and inspired millions around the world to do the same.

But for many of the kids who followed in Greta Thunberg's footsteps, the past four years have not flown by.

Instead, they've been punctuated by disappointment and failure. As the Fridays for Future movement grew bigger and more ambitious - drawing more than six million people into the streets worldwide at its peak in 2019 - the same cannot be said for the actions of world leaders on the climate file.

While there have been promises to cut emissions, Generation Greta maintains they're far short of what's needed to avoid climate disaster.

Friday afternoon, they gathered at Queen's Park, and in more than 600 locations worldwide - a little older, a little wiser and a little angrier. "We're here because the climate crisis is real," said Aliénor Rougeot, 23, one of the protest organizers. "But our emissions are still going up."

"And everyday, the people in the towers over there, in the banks, the people in government do nothing. They allow the destruction of our future to take place."

"Because of climate inaction over decades, people are dying now," she added. "Thirty-three million people have been displaced in Pakistan because of floods, because of the climate crisis."

More than 1,000 people were on hand in Toronto for one of the first global climate rallies since the pandemic brought in-person gatherings to a halt. And the bright-eyed kids of four years ago were nowhere to be found.

Theodore Lam, 17, cut his afternoon classes at Marc Garneau Collegiate to bring his younger sister, Sophia, to the rally. "Governments keep on making targets and keep on missing them," he said. "The climate emergency is here. Government needs to act like it."

Students, union activists and Indigenous people from across the city struck a confident but strident tone. Their demands, for example, are precise and ambitious. They want a commitment to a 60 per cent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions nationwide by 2030 - a full 50 per cent more than the current federal target.

They want an end to all fossil fuel subsidies and a massive investment to transition to a green economy, while respecting Indigenous sovereignty and a just transition for those who will lose their jobs, their homes and their livelihoods to extreme weather.

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In between turns at the microphone, Rougeot offered her thoughts on how the youth climate movement has grown up.

"A tremendous amount has changed," she said. "In 2019, I was offering suggestions, hoping they'd be followed. Now, it feels much more like demands: this is what you must do as people who are working for us. As elected officials, you're accountable to us."

"So it's a real change from optimism and hope. Now it translates into anger," she said.

The politicians on hand did not address the crowd. MPPs Mary-Margaret McMahon, Peter Tabuns, Mike Schreiner and Kristyn Wong-Tam preferred instead to use their presence as a sign of solidarity.

Other things have changed as well, including a global context of rapidly rising prices and record corporate profits.

"We have people asking themselves the question, 'Can we afford climate action when we can't afford a full tank?'" said Rougeot. "It makes me angry that the people who are profiting off pollution and inflation are feeding that narrative."

It's a message that was echoed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres this week when he told world leaders the fossil fuel industry is "feasting on hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies and windfall profits while household budgets shrink and our planet burns."

Guterres urged rich countries to tax the profits of energy companies and redirect the funds to "countries suffering loss and damage caused by the climate crisis."

Denmark is the only rich country that has so far stepped up with funding for "loss and damage" in the Global South due to climate-related disasters, pledging \$17.7 million at the UN assembly this week.

Ahead of the demonstration, federal Environment and Climate Change Minister Steven Guilbeault voiced his support.

"As a longtime environmental activist myself, I have been in your shoes, and I understand and share your frustration at the pace of change. But the only answer is to continue urgently pushing forward to tackle this crisis," he said in a statement.

"I admire your passion, and I appreciate you pushing us to go faster and further. By working together, it is possible to achieve a healthier, safer and more sustainable environment."

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